

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 320 188

CS 507 213

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TITLE The Passionless Honeymoon: Bush in the White House.
PUB DATE Apr 90
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Communication Association (81st, Philadelphia, PA, April 19-22, 1990).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication Research; *Mass Media Role; *News Media; *Persuasive Discourse; *Political Attitudes; *Presidents of the United States; Public Opinion; *Rhetorical Invention
IDENTIFIERS *Bush (George); Congress

ABSTRACT

The success of a president's "honeymoon" (the traditional period of good relations between a new president and both Congress and the public) is determined by his rhetoric, not his actions. Central to the rhetoric task facing a new president are differentiating himself and his policies from his predecessor and creating a "vision" that encompasses his goals for his term of office. Judging from an analysis of press coverage of his first 3 months in office, George Bush was relatively successful with the first of these goals, but failed, by most accounts, at the second. Mixed press responses may have resulted in the public's tentative assessment of Bush by the end of his honeymoon period. (Thirty-two notes are included.) (Author/SG)

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ED320188

The Passionless Honeymoon:

Bush in the White House:

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Abstract

In this essay, we suggest that the success of a president's honeymoon is determined by his rhetoric, not his actions, during this honeymoon period. We argue that central to the rhetorical tasks facing a new president are differentiating himself and his policies from his predecessor and creating a "vision" that encompasses his goals for his term of office. Using these two criteria, we provide an analysis of the press's coverage of George Bush's first three months in office. According to the press, George Bush was relatively successful with the first of these goals, but failed, by most accounts, at the second. the press's mixed responses possibly resulted in the public's tentative assessment of Bush by the end of his honeymoon period.

The Passionless Honeymoon:

Bush in the White House

Even before George Bush took the oath of office, pundits were predicting that his would be "the briefest honeymoon in history, a gridlock of indecision."¹ The reasoning behind this prediction included the difficulty of following Ronald Reagan's "act," delayed public and congressional reactions to the negativity of Bush's 1988 campaign, and Bush's lack of an agenda or vision from which one could be fashioned.

And yet, despite the prediction, after three months in the Oval office, President Bush maintained an unusually high approval rating, with 71 percent approving of the way he was handling the job. This compared quite favorably with the 62 percent approval that Ronald Reagan had at the same point in his presidency.² At the same time, however, "few Americans [said] they [had] a good idea of where the president [was] leading the country" and "almost half of those interviewed said they only somewhat approved of Bush's performance, suggesting that support for Bush [remained] tentative."³

We suggest that the success of a president's honeymoon is determined by his rhetoric, not his actions, during this crucial period and that central to the rhetorical tasks facing a new president are differentiating himself and his policies from his predecessor and creating a "vision" that encompasses his goals for his term of office. According to the press, George Bush was relatively successful with the first of these goals, but failed, by

most accounts, at the second. The mixed responses of the press possibly resulted in the public's tentative assessment of Bush by the end of his honeymoon period.

What is a Honeymoon?

In common parlance a honeymoon is a time when the media suspend their own interest and judgement, thereby conveying "the impression that the president is being given a chance by reporters to get to know his job and to relish the fruits of his newly won office for a few weeks before reporters and White House officials resume their traditional roles as adversaries."⁴

In our interpersonal lives we tend to equate courtship with rhetoric (wooing) and honeymoons with more active love-making. But politics lag behind. The honeymoon phase of the presidency, like the campaigning, is still a time of rhetoric; presidential actions end it. Theodore Sorenson, no stranger to presidential beginnings, notes that "The fairest test of a new President's 'honeymoon hundred,' when all is said and done, is what he's said, not done, the goals he has announced, not reached" Grossman and Kumar explain that this is so because "reporters present criticism in the form of a comparison between the president's rhetoric and his record. Since the president has no record at this time, his rhetoric is presented as the news story."⁵ Edwards and Wayne suggest that the honeymoon lasts until the new president begins "making hard choices that inevitably alienate segments of the population."⁶ When the president has taken a series of actions or made "some hard choices" against which his rhetoric can be

measured, and when opponents are more willing to speak out, "No longer is the president's rhetoric the only story. Now conflict and controversy claim the reporter's attention."⁷ The honeymoon is officially over.

However, until the point of action is reached, the press judges a president in the honeymoon period by his rhetoric. Two determinants of the length and success of his honeymoon, we argue, are the extent to which the press interprets the president's rhetoric as, 1) differentiating his goals from the previous administration's (particularly important for a former vice-president) and, 2) as laying out an agenda based on some "vision" for the country. How successful, then, according to the press, was George Bush at doing these two things?

Differentiation

One of the first rhetorical problems facing a new president, is differentiating himself from his predecessor. With a president elected on the "throw-the-rascals-out" model, such differentiation is easy. But George Bush had no such platform. Since he owed his election largely to his predecessor, he dared not alienate the Reaganites in his own administration, in Congress, or in the electorate.

Yet differentiation was needed. Reagan's "hands off" "management style," his supposed lack of attention to details (sometimes lack of attention at all), slothful work habits, slick media packaging and lack of knowledge and/or intelligence all had come under attack. The trick for George Bush was to differentiate

without hinting at repudiation or reproach.

Bush began this process immediately in his Inaugural address. After thanking Reagan for "the wonderful things you have done for America," Bush immediately, and repeatedly, noted that "a new breeze is blowing."⁸ This may not be as stark an image as a torch being passed to a new generation of Americans, but it did indicate that Bush intended not to be a Reagan clone. Indeed, much of the Inaugural could (but need not) be read as a partial repudiation of the Reagan years--of public and private greed, of contentiousness between presidency and Congress, of indifference to the ailing and destitute.

Several days later, conservative columnist William Safire toted up what he called Bush's "semiotics of dissimilarity," noting such things as more press conferences, "being prepared," making non-controversial Cabinet choices ("Not one thumb in the eye; no Haig, Casey, Watt, or Meese . . ."), focusing on the family, calling for cultural change ("Farewell Adolfo, hello L.L. Bean.") respecting Afro-Americans, and espousing high ethical standards.⁹

According to President Bush's close friends, Bush intended that these differences be noted. One of his friends said that "It's important to him that this change in style be noticed now because he's trying to get out from under the shadow very quickly and establish the fact that this is a new President with a distinct style very different from the old President."¹⁰

Several weeks later, conservative columnist Kevin Phillips noted, "After eight years of subordinating himself to Ronald

Reagan, George Bush now seems unembarrassed as his aides collude in newspaper stories about how nice it is to have a President who can read a memo, stay awake at meetings, repudiate racism and eschew vulgarity."¹¹

That President Bush was able to accomplish the differentiation is not surprising, that he did so without puncturing the honeymoon with the Reaganites is more of a feat, not miraculous perhaps, but certainly a deft piece of political rhetoric.

Setting an Agenda: The Vision Thing

Theodore Sorenson argues that with the honeymoon period "each new president is offered free of charge a once-in-a-Presidency opportunity to write his national agenda on a uniquely clean slate for a uniquely attentive audience." Using his own criteria, Sorenson concluded, "Mr. Bush didn't do it."¹²

Sorenson was not alone in this assessment. Throughout the honeymoon period the most consistent criticism of Bush touched on "the vision thing." Various commentators found him indecisive and hesitant, vague, uninformed--agendaless and visionless. In fact, in many instances, says former White House director of Communication David Gergen, "'the press itself has begun to set the agenda.' He noted that in the past few weeks, polls have begun to show the public expressing concerns--that Bush is off to a slow start, that he doesn't have clear goals--they heard it on television and read it in the press. We're now hearing the echo effects," says Gergen.¹³

Devroy suggests how Bush's indecision reads by noting that the

following comments by Bush all came from the same press conference: "We're in the process of discussion that." "No decision on that yet." "Not sure now." "We take whatever the next step is." "I'd have to talk to him about it because I don't know."¹⁴

One of the first strong attacks on Bush's indecisiveness stemmed from his hesitancy in responding to the challenges/opportunities of various Gorbachev proposals. The New York Times commented editorially that "thirty of President Bush's first hundred days are gone, yet he still has no government capable of managing foreign affairs and national security . . . The White House puts top priority on a review of policy towards the Soviet Union . . . But only Robert Blackwell, the East-West relations director on the National Security Staff, is on the job to conduct it."¹⁵

Two months later his indecisiveness and hesitancy concerning Gorbachev and related opportunities were still under attack: "The Russians slash their arms budget, Soviet voters throw the rascals out, the Poles and Hungarians take the first long steps toward parliamentary democracy--and Bush remarks petulantly, 'We'll be ready to react when we feel like reacting.'"¹⁶ A former White House official suggested that "One of his friends should sit down and explain to him the difference between being president and vice-president. The president weighs-in at an appropriate moment when he can have a significant impact. A vice-president does whatever he wants to."¹⁷

Another explanation for Bush's lack of response to the

Soviet's initiatives comes from Beckwith who notes that Bush "does not seem to have wrestled with the question of power relationships in the world when the cold war is no longer the determining factor. As Gorbachev prepared for a world dominated by not only the two super powers but also Japan, China and a consolidated Europe, Bush still seems focused on the U.S. role in countering the Soviets in regional conflicts."¹⁸ Bush's failure to get beyond cold war thinking, according to journalists, suggests a lack of world vision, and hence, a lack of a sense of which direction to lead the country.

But not all voices were critical of Bush's "wait and see" approach. William Hyland, editor of Foreign Affairs, suggested Bush was being "pragmatic" rather than indecisive. Yet even Hyland was critical of Bush's foot-dragging vis-a-vis Gorbachev: "The debate over whether Mr. Gorbachev will survive and whether his intentions are genuine is no longer productive. It is like wondering what the guillotining of Louis XVI meant for the future of the monarchy."¹⁹

Another, somewhat surprising, voice favoring Bush's moderation (or caution/hesitancy/indecision) was Sorenson: "Better Mr. Bush plodding and dodging in the Oval Office than John Kennedy launching the Bay of Pigs invasion, Gerald Ford pardoning his predecessor or Ronald Reagan organizing the Nicaraguan Contras, all without sufficient consideration of the alternatives and consequences."²⁰

Obviously, Bush's first 100 days were marked by caution. Whether that cautiousness was seen as just that or as

indecisiveness and hesitancy depended on the critical commentary of various journalists, but it is doubtful if Bush could have been helped by a sequence which appeared in CBS News in early April, about 70 days into his presidency: "First, oil, miles of it, spread across Prince William Sound. Then ducks drenched in oil. Then President Bush playing horseshoes."²¹

There may be disagreement on whether Bush is indecisive and hesitant, but there seemed little doubt that he "does not have a deeply held personal agenda. He has few ideological or intellectual beliefs at all, other than a basic decency, patriotism and desire for people to be accommodating."²²

The Bush Administration's defense on this issue was to say that the search for vision had to do with perception rather than reality because "it's based on models of activist Presidential influence, like F.D.R. and Ronald Reagan, who are not relevant to the Bush Administration in 1989 both in terms of what's desirable and what's politically possible."²³

Perhaps "vision" is too grandiose. No one has ever explained why a president has to have a "New Deal" or a "Great Society" in mind when he took over the office. On the other hand, the lack of an agenda, of clearly articulated goals, of any solid convictions other than "a basic decency, patriotism, and desire for people to be accommodating" would seem to be deficits that would be bound to mar any honeymoon period.

Despite a few flourishes in the Inaugural, the Bush speeches have been considered largely forgettable. As Bernard Weinraub has

written, "Mr. Bush's inauguration speech and his address on February 9th outlining his new program, the big oratorical events of the first days, have faded like premature crocuses. Since then his daily remarks, from ceremonial events and brief comments to major speeches, have generally been rambling and themeless. And they have been criticized widely and none too gently for spilling boredom . . . across Washington like oil across Prince William Sound."²⁴

More important, perhaps, than the quality of the speeches given were the speech occasions missed altogether---"on the oil spill in Alaska, human rights violations in China, starvation in the Sudan, ethical misconduct in Washington, gun control in America, arms control in Europe and thought control in Iran."²⁵ A president who understood the importance of rhetoric in a honeymoon would not have missed these occasions; a president with a vision, if not of how the world should be, at least of how the presidency could be used as a "bully pulpit," would not have missed these occasions. John Kennedy would not have missed these occasions; Ronald Reagan would not have missed these occasions. Even without any overarching vision, it is possible to establish a strong presence in the honeymoon period with rhetoric. The fairest assessment of any presidential honeymoon, then, is a rhetorical assessment. And on that account, journalists saw George Bush as failing.

Conclusion

So, was it a good honeymoon? That depends, it seems, on who

is doing the assessing. George Bush himself, who claimed "I don't even think in terms of 100 days because we aren't radically shifting things,"²⁶ yet "cranked up his staff . . . to give upbeat assessments of his first 100 days, in a public relations blitzkrieg"²⁷ provided this assessment: "In three short months we've made a good start coming to grips with issues demanding urgent attention and decisive action."²⁸

The public, as we have seen, seemed to have had mixed feelings about Bush's job after three months in office, or at least they were reserving judgement by taking a "wait and see" attitude. We have argued that the public's mixed response reflects that of the media. If, as we argue, the primary criteria used by the media to determine the success of a president's honeymoon period is not his actions but his rhetoric, the media seemed to present the argument that Bush's rhetoric had successfully differentiated him from Ronald Reagan. However, using the second criteria of rhetorical vision, according to the media, George Bush failed, or at least faltered badly.

Of course, another explanation for the mixed responses of the media and the public to George Bush's first three months in office may be the semantic inappropriateness of talking of "the honeymoon." With one groom and many brides there are many honeymoons of varying durations and passions. Some journalists saw the honeymoon as wasted, others were able to change their criteria and still like the President. Some, like R.W. Apple, announced that the honeymoon was over in February²⁹; others, like Seib and

McQueen, argued in April that the honeymoon was continuing.³⁰ And, of course, for those like Molly Ivins there never was a honeymoon: "His best quality, in my view, is that incurable tendency toward moments of transcendent dorkiness. . . . Deep down, he's shallow."³¹

Perhaps we can agree with Hendrik Hertzberg that judging a president on the basis of 100 days is an "idiocy,"³² but, like Hertzberg, we will then continue to do so. And we will continue to talk about "the honeymoon" as though there were just one rather than hundreds. And we will continue to disagree on presidential performance, just as we continue to disagree on how to cast our ballots behind the green curtain.

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32. Hertzberg, p. 27.